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Employment Security Department improves customer service through “mystery shoppers” and employee training

OLYMPIA – Mystery shopping isn’t just for malls. The Washington State Employment Security Department, adopting a practice seen in the retail sector, has taken innovative strides to ensure its staff provide the best customer service – and with good results.

Last year, Employment Security hired a national market research company to evaluate customer service. Since then, “mystery shoppers” posing as job seekers, employers and unemployment insurance claimants have provided the department with feedback about their customer service experiences.

In that time, customer service ratings have consistently improved.

Employment Security Commissioner Sylvia P. Mundy, who has a background in private business, suggested that the sort of customer service measures used in the retail sector could also benefit government. Her inquiries led to the department’s decision to simultaneously develop a customer service training program for all employees and establish a mystery shopping program.

Until now, mystery shopping programs were restricted primarily to the private sector. While a few government programs in other parts of the country have used secret shoppers as a way to evaluate service, Mundy said the Employment Security Department’s integrated approach is the first that she is aware of to be introduced on an agency-wide level.

“Mystery shopping provides us with valuable, unbiased information about the quality of customer service we provide and is nationally recognized as a promising practice,” Mundy said. “The U.S. Department of Labor is conducting research to determine the feasibility of implementing a mystery shopping program as a continuous quality improvement tool for the nation’s one-stop career center system.”

Since Employment Security’s program started, mystery shoppers hired by the research firm have made 254 in-person visits, 299 telephone calls, and 47 online inquiries to WorkSource centers, Unemployment Claims TeleCenters, tax offices, and administrative offices across the state.

Feedback provided by the visits is used to define quality service, identify opportunities for improvement, and reward exemplary customer service. Results are shared with Employment Security managers, employees and partners in the WorkSource system.

Shoppers rate the level of customer service they receive using a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (outstanding). Since the program began, overall ratings have improved from 3.2 to 3.7.

On-site wait times at offices have been reduced by 82 percent; only 3 percent of shoppers waited more than 10 minutes to receive service in the last quarter evaluated.

Employment Security has updated its employee training curriculum and taken other actions to improve customer service based on shopper findings. Staff at the agency's Unemployment Claims TeleCenters changed their script to ask more specific questions. Additional materials in non-English are displayed at WorkSource centers to ensure accessibility to services.

Although staff know the mystery shopping program exists, they are not told when their office will be evaluated. Because shoppers are trained to look, act and talk like real customers, it can be difficult to tell them apart from anyone else.

"Employees get excited when a question seems unusual, and think they're being mystery shopped," said Grace McGee, who works in the department's Office of Quality and Organizational Performance and reports on the research company's findings. "But the questions the shoppers ask are general. They're the same questions that our real customers ask."

Employees who receive a perfect score are recognized by the department, as those are the only names collected by mystery shoppers. All other staff who are mystery shopped remain anonymous.

Mystery shopping is just one tool the department is using to identify strengths and weaknesses and improve overall results.

"Excellent customer service is our most important goal," Mundy said. "We are undertaking strategies to improve customer service in every aspect of our business – from processing unemployment claims to helping our business customers understand government processes. Friendly, efficient service is the rule in our work – not the exception."

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